

What Is Sculpture? Four Curators Try to Define an Elusive Art Form

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A sculpture from Isa Genzken's series *Actors*, 2013, on view in the exhibition "Make Yourself Pretty," 2016, at the Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin.

PHOTO CHRISTIAN MARQUARDT/GETTY IMAGES

On the occasion of a "Sculpture"-themed issue published in September 2022, the editors of Art in America asked four curators to consider different definitions of an art form that continues to evolve after thousands of years.

Karen Lemmey

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For a long time, sculpture was simply defined as an artwork that occupies three dimensions. On a basic level, this remains true. But since the beginning of the 20th century, sculptors have made serious play of problematizing sculpture's third dimension, deftly manipulating it to be ever more elusive and illusionary, as if to draw attention to the instability of what had been, for millennia, the defining characteristic of their art form. A sculpture's third dimension can be barely measurable or even just implied; purely optical; kinetic, and thus variable; or only fully realized once the work is installed.

Senga Nengudi's "R.S.V.P." series, begun in 1977, is made with stretched pantyhose and sand, and can shrink down to almost nothing after commanding space and sparking wonder in a gallery. Carl Andre's 1997 series "Voltaglyph" best meets its 3D potential when someone stands on the metal plates the artist has placed on the floor. Fred Wilson's mirrors are neither concave nor convex, yet reflect a tremendous depth of field that changes dramatically with whatever and whoever shares their space. The interiors of Iván Navarro's boxes, constructed of lights and mirrors, seem to recede infinitely, much like the stacked, progressively smaller figures of Do Ho Suh's curving 23-foot column *Karma* (2010), which ultimately become so tiny the human eye cannot really see them. By contrast, Isamu Noguchi stretched the third dimension to galactic proportions, at least conceptually, in *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars* (1947), a Land art proposal depicting a human face with a mile-long nose that anticipated access to space travel. Examples abound of sculptures that insist on a flexible definition of the third dimension, making it a slippery criterion to follow.

Like three-dimensionality, the matter of medium was once a defining characteristic of sculpture. Things we call "sculpture" have, from paleolithic times on, consistently taken form in stone, clay, bone, tusk, shell, or wood, and later, in metals, plaster, wax, fibers, and plastics. But the list has now expanded to encompass assemblages of found objects, ephemera, and industrial debris, as well as sound baths, augmented reality, and virtual objects and realms. Eager as one might be to do so, it is pointless to enumerate all the materials used now. Unlike in the past, sculpture today is assembled from anything—even paint. Sarah Sze's exquisite screens and slabs of poured paint have taken sculpture through a wonderfully heretical turn that was unimaginable in the early modern era, when European schools of thought relentlessly ordered painting above sculpture, relegating the plastic arts, with their brute substances and hard labor, to a lower rung in the creative arts hierarchy.

The limited materials that once so commonly defined sculpture also limited who was recognized as a sculptor and who aspired to become one. The cost of casting bronze or sourcing marble, for example, was and remains prohibitive for many artists. As a consequence, some major works by important sculptors have been lost, simply because they were not rendered in more permanent materials. What if Augusta Savage had cast her 1939 World's Fair monument, *The Harp*, in bronze instead of plaster?

The expanding universe of mediums for contemporary sculptors suggests there will be more gateways and ideally fewer gatekeepers in a genre that, in recent centuries, was often disturbingly exclusionary. With many monuments these days being removed from pedestals, both historical and contemporary sculptures are closely scrutinized for who represents whom and to what end. Sculpture clearly has a fraught moral history. It has been intimately tied to the body through life casts and death masks, made with and without consent. It has served as a surrogate for individuals positioned in both uplifting and deprecating ways. It has been known to elicit actions rarely aimed at paintings: people kiss, adorn, graffiti tag, and, in extreme cases, burn these artworks as effigies. Sculpture can intimidate or inspire as viewers gaze up at a towering presence, while shrinking in its shadow. Sharing the three dimensions that we too occupy, sculpture can have a triangulating effect, making us more physically aware of our surroundings and those who happen to share the space: it may call our attention to a fellow visitor's unassuming contrapposto that seems to mimic the pose of a sculpture we are serendipitously observing together.

As communities consider what might replace toppled sculptures, it is encouraging to consider the wide possibilities of social sculpture, the most expansive addition to the list of sculpture types to date. The term “social sculpture” is credited to Joseph Beuys, who asserted in the 1970s that anyone could create art with any object or action—indeed, life itself could be seen as a kind of collective sculpture. Over time, social sculpture has become more closely associated with practices that consciously invite members of a community to cocreate a work that is invested in the needs and interests of that community. Social sculpture has the potential to work for a greater good, serve many publics, effect positive change, and literally heal—as seen in Simone Leigh’s *Free People’s Medical Clinic* (2014), a project that shed light on the long history of Black health care providers, while offering a number of no-cost health and healing services for one month in a building in Weeksville, Brooklyn, a historically Black neighborhood. Less durable than works in marble or bronze, social sculptures may nevertheless outlast all others, while also moving away from the environmentally extractive mediums of the past, thus freeing sculpture from its traditional three dimensions to be instead a boundless art form, one that is whatever a sculptor wants it to be.

What is sculpture anyway? Can a film, for example, be a sculpture? This is a question I often asked myself while working with Lucy Raven on her 2021 exhibition for Dia Art Foundation in New York, an institution with a long history of testing sculpture’s limits. Her black-and-white 45-minute film *Ready Mix* (2021) traces the production of ready-mix concrete from mineral extraction to hydration. Minerals flow liquidly on screen, accumulating until they settle into a compounded monolith. They are hard, then fluid; gravitational and sedimentary.

I asked Raven, who earned an MFA in sculpture at Bard but works largely with moving images, what place sculpture occupies in her own thinking. She wrote to me that her primary concern is with “form—shape, mass, material, composition, decomposition, erosion, accumulation, and the rhythms and pressures” and the way “those things form and deform each other.” What appeals to me about her answer is her reflexive understanding of form—the particular way an object appears in the world—not as something fixed, but rather something malleable, unstable even; something shifting in, around, and through various physical and contextual forces.

Her comment reminded me of something Melvin Edwards recently told me: “my whole thing about sculpture is that it’s relative.” This resonated the way good truisms do, as both obvious and profound. Just as sculptural objects look different depending on where you are standing, the discipline too is always being shaped by new contexts and perspectives.

Edwards said this while we were installing *Gonogo* (1970/2022) at Dia Beacon, a work made from barbed wire that stretches from floor to ceiling at regular intervals, extending from the gallery wall in two parallel planes. This corridor is then diagonally bisected by yet another plane of these punctuated lines of wire, such that the triangle formed at the right side creates what Edwards describes as a kind of cul de sac. His notes record technical details about placement and scale, while the comment about sculpture being relative suggests his concern for the perceptual unfolding of the work of art by the moving spectator (as well as the attendant formal and phenomenological debates around sculpture, particularly Minimal sculpture in the late ’60s and early ’70s that are central to Dia’s collection and which this work so pointedly addresses). Edwards went on to say, a few minutes later, “a shape is important based on the space it is in,” underscoring, in his typically understated way, his careful attunement to sculpture’s expanse into a field of spatial relationships that exist beyond the discrete object.



View of the exhibition “Melvin Edwards,” 2022, at Dia Beacon, New York.
BILL JACOBSON STUDIO

Twenty years have passed since art historian Miwon Kwon published her influential book *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, which identified site-specificity as the dominant concern of sculptural debates since the mid-20th century. Site-specificity continues to be a critical (if not *the* critical) lens through which sculptural relations emerge. And while *Gonogo* is not site-specific in the most literal sense—meaning its existence isn’t inextricably tied to the exact conditions (physical, institutional, or cultural) of its location—it is, like many sculptures today, site-responsive. Its physical parameters, height and width, for example, are determined in relationship to the architectural environment it’s displayed in, while its meaning is inflected by and also animates each new context.

The piece was conceived in 1970 as Edwards was planning for a solo presentation of his “B Wire” sculptures at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. There, he showed four related architecturally scaled installations, before turning away from this method of working for a while. (As artist and critic Frank Bowling dryly observed at the time, some white critics failed to grasp the biting wit of the barbed wire project and the importance of the destabilizing effects of his razor-sharp material.)

At Dia Beacon, *Gonogo* claims its physicality by reaching through and across the boundaries of the architectural frame, but takes on new meaning as a counterpoint to the art-historical canon Dia has helped institutionalize. It is both of its time and out of it. Its appearance, as impenetrably layered or porously loose, punishingly imposing or cripplingly beautiful, changes with each viewer’s movement around the work. It is a sculpture, it is an architectural intervention, it is the site of art historical and cultural contestation.

The contingent nature of this sited artwork reminds me of an observation that Kishio Suga—an artist who has worked with objects in various ways since the mid-1960s—made about the interdependence of things. “We might say,” he remarked, “it’s the contact point between things that do move and things that don’t move that becomes the basis for ideas of site.” Site, like form, is an unstable thing, shifting as it accommodates different types of material, conceptual, historical, and social content.

Julieta González

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For the modernist avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century, sculpture was primarily a spatialized practice, demonstrated, for example, in the Constructivist sculptures of Aleksander Rodchenko, Karl Ioganson, and El Lissitzky. In the 1960s, the dematerialization of art prompted by the introduction of a cybernetic systems-oriented and relational view of the world further expanded the notion of sculpture, opening it up to consider gallery space, spectator, and sculptural object as parts of a system. Brazilian artists such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Hélio Oiticica created non-object works around 1960 that emphasized kinesthetic and affective dimensions within the expanding field of sculpture. These three moments are crucial to my thinking about sculpture up until the early 2000s. Each one accentuates a different problem or issue in sculptural practice: spatiotemporality, environment, and experience/feeling.

Today, artists working with sculpture consistently reflect on material cultures and their close associations with historical upheavals. In the past 15 years, I’ve found myself interested in a historiographic turn in art. I’m drawn to sculptors like Simon Starling and Leonor Antunes, both of whom work with everyday objects to probe the cultural assumptions they embody. Sculptures provide not only physical and perceptual experiences, but often symbolic ones as well. We see this in artworks that challenge the role of the monument, like Kara Walker’s recent large-scale works at a former sugar factory in Brooklyn and at Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall in London, where she addressed problematic episodes in history, questioning the very nature of commemorative sculpture.

The freedom afforded by what Rosalind Krauss described in 1979 as sculpture’s “expanded field,” referring to how “rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture,” is at the same time a challenge for artists who work with three-dimensional objects and those who approach the language of sculpture from a novel perspective. The moments I mentioned before—Constructivism, the dematerialization practices of the 1960s and 1970s, the participatory and sensorial approach of the Brazilian artists, and the historical revisionism undertaken by artists today—are each significant ruptures that have informed successive approaches to sculpture.

Kyle Dancewicz

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While co-organizing a recent survey of Liz Larner’s work at SculptureCenter in New York, I found myself moved by the way her practice has vexed sculptural conventions since the 1980s, at the same time remaining committed to the discipline’s formal, spatial, and material questions. I think it is fair to say that many artists working today make what they want to make, and then determine after the fact whether or not it has anything to do with a disciplinary category. But in so much of Larner’s work, I sensed that her desire to make a “sculpture” came first, and its effects on viewers followed.

I found myself referring to her sculptures as “hardcore” a few times, and recall that I was lightly challenged on this during a public program we held in conjunction with the show. (By “hardcore,” did I mean sexually explicit? Or punk? Or metal?) But I felt validated a few weeks later when I read a 2003 essay on Isa Genzken by the late critic Giovanni Intra, who used the term the way I meant it: “Genzken’s work is sculpture right and proper, and, in this sense, it is hardcore.” He continued: “In its linear progression since the 1970s, when it was engaged with the optical problems in object perception via minimalism, it has increasingly thrown real moments of chaos into the void of sculpture.”

I am struck by the paradox that Intra sets up: to make sculpture “right and proper,” ostensibly to bring concrete, three-dimensional, physical objects into being, is to widen or deepen a void. Coincidentally, I found a similar reference—to a pit, which is perhaps a less forbidding subcategory of void—in the catalogue for Vincent Fecteau’s 2019 exhibition at CCA Wattis in San Francisco, which includes the transcript of a 1981 artist talk by Don Potts. Potts refers to making art as setting “the subtlest trap you’ve ever made,” and compares it to a form of meditation that “clean[s] off each sheet of glass so you can see further down,” below whatever typically bubbles up from one’s lowest level of consciousness.

Where are the edges of a void-shaped discipline, or the bottom of a bottomless pit? One of the most succinct answers I’ve ever heard came from artist Lan Tuazon, who, while visiting SculptureCenter with students, said in passing that sculpture has “dimensions elsewhere.” I was struck by how much that notion asks of sculpture: to be here, and to evoke other places and times entirely; to represent one node in a network of activity; to transport information across dissimilar contexts.

Artists today contend with the hopeless breadth of sculpture, remaining “responsive to” a site while talking about opening up new worlds or possibilities. The competing requirements are many if we consider sculpture a spatial medium, one that is critically invested in the apparatus of the exhibition or the institution. At the same time, it must contend with its own art history, though it is frequently compelled to share the concerns and techniques of video, photography, painting, performance, and other media. It often privileges process, and by now we are used to imagining that many sculptures will change and evolve over the duration of a show, or over many years—as crumbling earth, perhaps, or as memories of social interactions. It’s an art form that can integrate found objects, consumer goods, craft techniques, and industrial fabrication, along with their refuse and waste. We notice when it inserts itself into systems of exchange: it acts as a flashpoint revealing the politics of property, possession, and provenance.

An earlier essay by Intra, this time on Larner, describes how each sculpture provisionally resolves these competing imperatives while synthesizing time, place, and material. Characterizing parts of her work that have dealt with color, perception, and illusion as “jump sculpture,” Intra finds a separate space for sculpture in some version of quantum physics: “Sculpture as a swarm, a constellation of particles which stop for a moment in one place only to come apart again, a buzzing shape like a flock of birds, moving between dimensions, qualities, colors, and weights. Sculpture doesn’t sit still—like it was told to—it literally hops through space and time.” I don’t mean to reinvest all sculpture with some kind of misplaced mysticism, but it seems to me that the main reason to hold onto the idea of “sculpture” at all is that it both sharpens the immense estrangement we may feel from our own bodies, from history, from everything that is not us, and at the same time offers to link us to them physically, or invites us to glimpse the broad frames or clouds of consciousness that govern our material lives. I think the way forward involves more void-, pit-, flock-of-birds-oriented sculpture—more sculpture that opens the chasm and gives only partial directions for how to navigate it.